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ABSTRACT

This discussion paper provides background material to four issues identified as important to study for the adult literacy effort in Washington State: goals and outcomes, priorities for service, effective practices, and roles of providers. The paper provides a starting point for decision making. First, it sets a backdrop for the attention focused on basic skills in the state. It shows that an examination of adult basic education in the state can be divided into three areas: (1) the importance of adult literacy to the global competitiveness of the state; (2) the demand for accountability, standards of program quality, and collaboration; and (3) recent findings about literacy needs, services, and student persistence. The discussion highlights four major assumptions underlying current policy and practice: definitions of literacy, the deficit model, learners' goals versus society's goals, and literacy as the sole determinant of self-sufficiency. The paper presents these conclusions: the skills of workers, particularly those who traditionally have the lowest literacy skills, are critical to the state's economy; accountability is necessary; new adult literacy standards are needed based on the Program Quality Indicators adopted in 1992; agency cooperation is improving; learners are not staying in programs long enough to make a difference; and resources are not adequate to meet the needs. It recommends considering new guiding principles, including the following: consciously chosen and shared definitions of literacy, an orientation toward adult learners founded on strengths rather than weaknesses, incorporation of learners' goals along with society's goals, and recognition that literacy is only one of many complex and interacting factors involved in individual and social change. (KC)

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A Series of Discussion Papers for the Adult Education Advisory Council

ReDirection: Options for Policy and Practice in Adult Literacy in Washington State

Background to the Issues

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"If we do what we've always done, we'll get what we've always got."
--General Motors Chairman Roger Smith on
traditional adult basic skills instruction at a Private Industry Council meeting.

OVERVIEW

Literacy is no longer a marginal public policy issue. There is widespread agreement that lack of proficiency in basic skills is a national problem, and expectations are high that the literacy problem can be solved. Goal 5 of the Goals 2000 states that every adult American will be literate by the year 2000.

With national attention focused on literacy, the public, government agencies, business and labor have become partners and investors in literacy education. These stakeholders are calling for greater accountability at the state and local level from the organizations that provide adult literacy instruction.

In the summer of 1993, the Washington State Adult Education Advisory Council responded to the literacy challenge by setting five goals for their work plan. One of these goals is to influence policy makers and stakeholders with regard to adult basic education.[1] Specifically, the Council identified four issues central to the State Legislature's goal of reducing adult illiteracy to five percent by the year 2010.[2]

- ◆Goals and Outcomes
- ◆Priorities for Service
- ◆Effective Practices
- ◆Roles of Providers

In making recommendations about these issues, the Advisory Council is seeking a fundamental redirection in the policy and practice of basic skills education in Washington State. To assist the Council, five discussion papers, four of which will directly address each of the issues outlined above, are being prepared.

This first discussion paper serves as a background to the four issues. It provides a starting point for decision making, a practical and philosophical basis for making recommendations. First, it sets a backdrop for the attention focused on basic skills in the state. From there, the discussion highlights four major assumptions underlying current policy and practice. The Advisory Council is in the best position to examine these assumptions at this point and

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[1]For the purposes of this paper, the terms adult basic education, literacy education, adult literacy, and basic skills are used interchangeably. Adult basic education generally includes reading, writing, computation, English as a Second Language. In some programs, it also includes problem solving, critical thinking, and personal management.
[2]Washington State Senate Bill 6411.

recognize their implications in the larger world of adult literacy education. A new direction for adult literacy cannot be built upon old assumptions.

THE STATE OF THE STATE

An examination of adult basic education in Washington State can be divided into three areas. The first is the importance of adult literacy to the global competitiveness of the state. The second is the demand for accountability, standards of program quality, and collaboration. The third is recent findings about literacy needs, services, and student persistence.

Global Competitiveness

A well-educated workforce is vital to the competitiveness of the state in the global economy. According to the *Investment in Human Capital Study*, employers have serious concerns about the basic skills of workers, a concern that is echoed nationally. However, the census statistics and the recently released State Adult Literacy Survey (SALS) data show that significant numbers of adults are lacking the skills necessary to meet the rising skill demands of the workplace. Moreover, it is projected that new entrants into the workforce will be predominantly immigrants, women, and minorities—groups that traditionally have lower levels of technical skill attainment and greater need for remedial basic skills training.

Accountability

Calls for accountability of federally supported adult basic skills programs began with a 1988 amendment to the Adult Education Act (AEA) requiring states to provide some data on programmatic outcomes. However, at the state level most basic skills programs are not held accountable for student outcomes. Demands for accountability are also the result of the high expectations for literacy education, including the assumed link between basic skills and employability, basic skills and productivity, and basic skills and self-sufficiency. While these connections have become widely accepted, it is necessary to critically examine what instruction in basic skills education can and cannot impact.

Standards of Program Quality

The National Literacy Act of 1991 further amended the AEA to require all states to develop indicators of program quality, including standards and measures for determining the effectiveness of adult basic education programs. Program quality indicators for Washington State have been adopted, but standards and measures are still being developed. When the indicators were adopted in 1993, the State Job Training Coordinating Council, the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board and the Adult Education Advisory Council recommended that they apply to all programs regardless of funding source.

Efforts in Collaboration

There are at least 12 federal and state agencies and programs involved in adult basic skills instruction in Washington, with community and technical colleges serving over half of the students. The multiplicity of agencies benefits adults by providing diverse services, but often makes access and management difficult. On both the state and federal levels, the movement toward interagency collaboration and coordination is strong. Washington State is promoting collaborative efforts among basic skills providers, Department of Social and Health Services and Employment Security Department through regional workshops and

other efforts with a grant from the National Institute for Literacy as well as through small incentives. Differences about the goals of basic skills programs, the definition of the target population, the appropriate roles for various entities, and the most effective strategies for instruction and assessment make interagency collaboration more difficult.

Literacy Need

Efforts have been made to measure the scope of literacy need in the state. According to *Adult Basic Skills Instruction Services and Needs in Washington,* in the 1990 census 777,728 adults reported that they had not completed high school or do not speak English well or at all. More recently, the State Adult Literacy Survey (SALS) report, assuming that those who performed in the two lowest literacy levels on the five-level scale are deficient in literacy skills, projects that over one million Washingtonians could benefit from literacy services. While some question these statistics, these two studies indicate the scope of the potential need for literacy services in Washington.

Services

Approximately 77,700 adults were served in all of Washington's basic skills programs in 1991-1992. In other words, between 8 and 11 percent of those who might benefit from adult basic education actually enrolled in classes, a figure that corresponds with national estimates. Current levels of spending are at an all-time high, yet they are still insufficient to meet the need.[3] Approximately 40.9 million dollars from all funding sources in addition to about 300,000 hours of volunteer time were spent on adult basic education services in 1991-92.[4] This compares to approximately 450 million dollars allocated to the community and technical college system each year. Not only is the percentage of population served low, effectiveness is limited by inadequate hours of instruction, waiting lists, over reliance on part-time teachers, and the general instability of funding.

Student Persistence

Tentative results of a recent study of adults enrolled in Washington community college basic skills programs indicate that only 44 to 49 percent of basic skills students who enrolled in the fall of 1991 continued for a second quarter. Those who left early had completed on average a maximum of 75 hours.[5] This is consistent with the data from the ongoing National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs. It is generally agreed that a minimum of 100 hours of attendance for students with less than tenth grade abilities is required to achieve significant gains.

QUESTIONING OLD ASSUMPTIONS

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[3]William Zumeta et al. (1992). *Adult Basic Skills Instruction Services and Needs in Washington.* Human Services Policy Center, University of Washington.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. (Draft, 1994). *Policy Issues for Adult Basic Education and English as a Second Language (ABE/ESL) Training in Washington Community and Technical Colleges.*

Several assumptions that underlie current literacy policy and practice have recently been called into question by researchers in the field. They are an appropriate subject of scrutiny as leaders re-evaluate the state of literacy education in Washington. These prevailing beliefs cut across all four of the issues considered in this series. They are fundamental to the discussion and decisions about the future direction of literacy policy.

Literacy is Literacy is Literacy

The first assumption is that there is widespread agreement about what literacy is, how it can be determined and when it has been achieved. Gone are the days when literacy was defined by an individual's ability to sign his or her name. The definition of literacy in the National Literacy Act of 1991 reflects the complexity and multiplicity of interpretations. It defines literacy as "an individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English, and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential."

As the field of adult literacy has expanded and the notion of literacy has become more complex, theorists have identified four different concepts about literacy operating in the field: literacy as skills, literacy as tasks, literacy as practice and literacy as critical reflection.[6] These concepts frame literacy from the very narrow, i.e. skills required to decode words, to the broadest, i.e. knowing how to ask questions and become involved in social action in the larger community.

As literacy can be viewed in many ways, literacy in practice is manifested in many forms. And whether explicit or not, these interpretations underlie every decision at the policy level and every component of local programs. The definition of literacy is reflected in the selection of goals, definition of successful outcomes, curriculum and instructional practice, and the means used to measure student progress and program accountability.

The Deficit Model

The second assumption is that undereducated adults are deficient in the skills and knowledge necessary to function in society. It is therefore the purpose of adult basic skills instruction to remedy these deficiencies. This assumption is so fundamental to adult basic education that it has long dictated the teaching cycle: a teacher diagnoses the learners' deficits, often through a standardized test, then prescribes instructional remedies. But theorists and practitioners in recent years have begun to question the accuracy of this assumption and its impact on program effectiveness. While undereducated adults often earn less and have fewer years of schooling than individuals with higher literacy levels, many function well in their jobs and in their families and are church and community leaders.

The degree to which this orientation impairs instruction or acts as a deterrent to participation has not yet been adequately researched. It is certain, however, that the deficit model emphasizes weaknesses rather than building on strengths. It might account in part for the low retention rates if learners are demoralized by an instructional process which begins by showing them, often in terms of grade level, just how far they are from where

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[6] Susan Lytle and Marcie Wolfe. (1989). *Adult Literacy Education: Program Evaluation and Learner Assessment.* Columbus, Ohio: Eric Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education.

they ought to be. Moreover, it perpetuates the stigma that has been attached to illiteracy making it difficult for learners to publicize their low literacy by enrolling in classes.

Recently, participatory literacy has been presented as an alternative to the deficit model. Collaborative, centered on learners' goals, and respectful of learners' subcultures, it requires an examination of values and habitual practices. "Participatory literacy programs challenge the prevailing conventional wisdom because of their fundamental assumption that students are capable of participating as partners in programs."[7]

Learners' Goals Match Society's Goals

The third assumption is that goals of adult basic skills instruction, which are determined by the larger society—by legislatures, funders, and programs—are identical to learners' goals. However, national and state research indicates that is only partially true.

A study of the goals of students enrolled in Washington community college adult basic skills programs found that, in general, students' motivations for participating are personal as well as instrumental (e.g., employment, getting a college degree).[8] Research on the motivations of individuals with low literacy skills in Iowa found ten factors representing the basic motivations for adults attending ABE in that state. Educational advancement was found to be the most important motivation, followed by self-improvement and literacy development.[9]

Similarly, the preliminary results of a long-term national study show that "the vast majority of new clients enroll in the federal adult education program for personal reasons rather than because of externally imposed requirements from an employer or from another program or agency."[10] This is not to say that students do not have employment goals. But it does indicate that what students want and what society wants for them may not be identical. And, as one researcher commented, "Society is able to reap its benefits from adult literacy education only if learners are able to reap theirs."[11]

Studies have also found that learners' goals are not only different, they are more complex than society's goals for them. In general, adult learners have "multiple motives" for participating in adult basic education services. Research on motivations of students in federal ABE programs reveals that, like the population at large, adult students demonstrate a wide range of motivations for participating in literacy education; they span the personal, social and economic.

Literacy = Self-Sufficiency

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[7] Hannah Arlene Fingeret. (1992). *Adult Literacy Education: Current and Future Directions, An Update.* Columbus, Ohio: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, p. 8.

[8] Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. (Draft, 1994). *Policy Issues for Adult Basic Education and English as a Second Language (ABE/ESL) Training in Washington Community and Technical Colleges.*

[9] Hal Beder. (1991). *Adult Literacy: Issues for Policy and Practice.* Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company, p. 60.

[10] Development Associates. (1993). *National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs,* Bulletin No. 5.

[11] Hal Beder. (1991). *Adult Literacy: Issues for Policy and Practice.* Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company, p. 128.

A fourth assumption, one that is responsible for much of the present amount of investment and interest in the field, is that acquisition of literacy skills in and of itself can bring about economic and social change. The results of the SALS indicate that individuals with low literacy skills are more likely to earn less or be unemployed, and generally are less educated than those who performed in levels three and above. Literacy is not, however, the single determining factor responsible for an individual's life conditions. Another critical factor is educational attainment: new examination of the NALS data indicates that with less than a secondary education, those who performed in literacy level four earned the same wage and income as those who performed in level 1.[12] Literacy skills are one part of a complex web of social conditions that can lead to economic self-sufficiency. However, literacy alone cannot guarantee social or economic improvement.[13]

It has been suggested in the research that there is a cumulative rather than an immediate and direct effect of literacy education. In other words, literacy education has modest short-term impact but significant long-term effects. Until long-term impact studies with stringent controls are done, the role of literacy in individual social and economic betterment is speculative. The most important impacts of adult literacy may be "cumulative, indirect, and long term."[14]

CONCLUSIONS

The Adult Education Advisory Council has accepted the challenge to redirect adult basic education in Washington State. This challenge results from an array of factors:

- The skills of workers, particularly those who traditionally have the lowest literacy skills, are critical to the state's economic productivity.
- The public, government, and providers themselves are calling for accountability.
- The state must adopt standards and measures based on the Program Quality Indicators adopted in 1992.
- The movement toward collaboration among agencies has never been stronger.
- Resources are not adequate to produce the quantity or quality of services required to meet needs.

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[12] Steve Reder. Presented at the Western Regional Meeting of Adult Basic Education Directors, April 18, 1994.

[13] Hanna Arlene Fingeret. (1992). *Adult Literacy Education: Current and Future Directions, An Update.* ERIC Clearinghouse of Adult, Career, and Vocational Education.

[14] Hal Beder. (1991). *Adult Literacy: Issues for Policy and Practice.* Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company.

- Learners are generally not staying in programs long enough to make significant gains.

With this challenge comes the responsibility of examining and discarding assumptions that are no longer useful, and considering new guiding principles:

- Consciously chosen and shared definitions of literacy.
- An orientation toward undereducated adults, which is reflected in policy and practice, focusing on strengths rather than deficiencies.
- Incorporation of learners' goals along with the goals of the larger society.
- Recognition that literacy is only one of many complex and interacting factors involved in individual and social change.

A vision of literacy guided by a philosophy such as this has the potential to fundamentally change the direction of literacy education and therefore its impact on the goals of individuals, the state, and the nation.